

2014

Valediction

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Schuman, Sam, "Valediction" (2014). *Honors in Practice -- Online Archive*. 202.
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Valediction

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(What follows is adapted from a talk that Sam Schuman, Chancellor Emeritus of the University of North Carolina Asheville, delivered at the university's dedication of its new fitness center to him on August 31, 2013.)

I first started coming to UNC Asheville in the early 1970s, when Nancy and I would visit her parents, who lived about two miles from where we stand today. I'd come to the campus, then a much more modest place, and use two facilities: the library and the outdoor track (then an unnamed cinder oval). Forty years later, I'm still here a couple of times a week to use the library and the physical education facilities. I might not be very good at things, but I do tend to be persistent. The library and the track and the Center for Health and Wellness are named for important benefactors of our university, and I am so very proud that UNCA has graciously put my name on its fine new fitness area, to which I repair so regularly that I get irritated if someone is on *my* elliptical machine!

I've been thinking quite a bit about the role of physical wellbeing at colleges and universities recently, so indulge me in a minute or two on this subject. I'm in the process of finishing up the publication of a monograph for the National Collegiate Honors Council on "holistic higher education," for which my working title has been *If Honors Students Were People* [editor's note: published in 2014 and now available in print and online]. The premise, of course, is that they actually *are* people and thus have three intimately connected aspects: minds, spirits, and bodies. The primary purpose of colleges and universities is to help students cultivate their minds, but, ever since the happy demise of required gym and required chapel in the 1960s, we have drifted away from the cultivation of the body and the spirit. I was glad to see gym and chapel requirements go, and I don't want to bring them back, but when these antique programs were generally abolished, we forgot to substitute anything that would fill the very real needs they were originally meant to satisfy.

In terms of spiritual cultivation, much research has shown that students come to college seeking spiritual growth and nourishment. About eighty percent of first-year college students, according to the studies of Alexander W. Astin et al. (*Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives*, Jossey Bass, 2011), come to college seeking answers to the big questions of life's meaning and purpose: Who am I? What do I wish to become? If I must die, how should I live? What is the meaning of my life? When they graduate, most

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of those students express disappointment that these subjects have been scrupulously avoided in their studies for four years.

In terms of physical activity, the past decade or so has seen definitive proof in the field of neuroscience that vigorous physical activity stimulates the creation of new brain cells and significantly enhances learning. I would not require every UNCA student (and teacher and administrator and staff member and retiree) to spend an hour a day here in the fitness area . . . I think. But I do believe that having a splendid area like this and making it inviting, welcoming, and fun is a very good step in the right direction. It is a delight to me to have this connection with a facility that will help students enhance the wellbeing of their bodies and will make them even sharper and more capable learners.

In 1939, on an occasion with some resemblance to this one, one of the mythic athletic heroes of my youth declared to a packed Yankee Stadium in New York, "Today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth." Me too. I share Lou Gehrig's feeling. And much of that luck is here, now. I have spent the last fifty-three years on the campuses of colleges and universities that, for all their problems then and now, are still the best places I can imagine being, none better than this university. I've had interesting and worthwhile work on those campuses. I've had wonderful, stimulating, and supportive teachers, colleagues, and students with whom to do that work. I've actually gotten paid to read books and to talk to people about them. What a racket! I've seen far more of the world than I ever imagined I would, from England to Auckland, Beijing to Belgium, Argentina to Alaska. My greatest blessing, of course, has been my family.

My two favorite authors are Vladimir Nabokov and William Shakespeare. Nabokov said, "Life is a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness," and Shakespeare said of life, "so quick bright things come to confusion." Both are saying that life is short—brief and quick—but they are also reminding us that it is filled with brightness and light, with joy and lovingkindness. It is a blessing beyond measure. I'm so glad to celebrate it in a place where generations of us will enrich and deepen the delights of our lives. I am the luckiest man on the face of the earth.

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